

Protect food stamps

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There is no question that Congress ought to be keeping a tight rein on federal spending. However, balancing the budget on the backs of the poorest Americans is not the way. Proposed cuts in the food stamp program should be rejected.

The Bush administration set up this situation by proposing \$9 billion in cuts over five years to farm and nutrition programs. House and Senate budget committees whittled that reduction to \$3 billion, and farm advocacy groups are fighting to pass along more than half that hit to the food stamp program. That suggestion, which has some support in the U.S. House, ought to be rejected.

The president initially suggested a \$600 million cut over five years to food stamps, a move that would knock about 300,000 Americans off the program. That's a tough scenario coming at a time when the number of Americans eligible for the program due to poverty has climbed by 8 million in recent years. About 44,700 Vermonters receive food stamps.

The program is not "fat" by any means. Of the 24 million Americans participating, 80 percent have children and the remainder are considered elderly or disabled. In most cases, they receive about \$1 per meal or less. It's money that comes into the state and is spent in local grocery stores, which offers a somewhat unconventional boost to the economy.

If passed, this hit on food assistance comes in tandem with rising housing and health care costs, as well as fuel oil and gasoline increases of about 30 percent. It's hard enough to keep food on the table without these additional pressures.

The second problem with the latest suggested cut is that it is based on a mathematical formula: Since food stamps' proportion of farm and nutrition funding is larger than half, the thinking goes that the program should face a proportional hit of the cut. But assistance to put food on the table must be based on need -- not numbers.

Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., was right in telling the Free Press, "As the Congress finishes its work on the budget, I am distressed that many worthy programs are forced into competition for resources that are much too scarce. While budgeting by its nature forces choices among competing demands, time after time Congress has chosen to afflict the afflicted and comfort the comfortable."

The reality is that one way or another, it is taxpayers and ordinary Vermonters who will shoulder the cost of feeding others because Vermonters will never stand by and watch their neighbors go hungry if the federal government turns its back. So, the burden shifts to the state, already-strapped food shelves, charities, nonprofits and others.

Congress is right to control federal spending and look for cuts in programs that can absorb the losses. It is unfortunate, however, that the current debate pits farmers against low-income families. Many farmers, particularly those on small family farms, need help, too. Congress should focus its assistance on these farms-in-need, shifting the cuts to other agricultural areas that can better absorb the losses.

The food stamp program is not wasteful; it puts food on the table of our neighbors. It should be spared these cuts because children need healthy food and regular meals.